



# BIG OAKS

Newsletter of Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge & Big Oaks Conservation Society

## *A Word From the President*

*By Jim Jackson*

Spring 2013

2013 begins for BOCS with a sense of purpose and enthusiasm. In this newsletter you will find articles relating to the challenges we face as a friends' group supporting Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (Page 10). Despite the potential obstacles before us, I believe we can look with pride to our accomplishments, passion, and sense of purpose.

This year brings the tried-and-true BOCS events: Youth Turkey Hunt, Outdoor Women at Big Oaks, Take a Kid Fishing Day, Youth Deer Hunt, and the Christmas Party. In addition, we hope to establish the Ice Cream Social as an annual event. There is also consideration for BOCS to have a booth at the autumn Madison Chili, Soup, and Stew event; this could be a fund-raising endeavor, but would certainly bring BOCS some public recognition. On-refuge events, such as a family lawn

picnic (perhaps on the Old Timbers Lodge site) with tours of the Lodge will hopefully bring more BOCS members and prospective members onto the refuge. Excellent ideas from the BONWR staff, BOCS members, and others have been suggested for new ways to promote and utilize the Refuge. There has been an increasing interest in ways to preserve and promote the historical legacy of the Refuge from the time of private ownership of the land that became Jefferson Proving Ground, through the JPG years, to the present.



Refuge Photo of the 2011 Ice Cream Social at Oakdale School

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Hopefully this year will become a time of growth in our membership and a renewed sense of enthusiasm about our marvelous Refuge. In dealing with the problems and challenges BOCS faces, we tend to overlook the very many positives at our feet. The Refuge is thriving; we have a top-notch refuge staff; BOCS currently has an excellent relationship with the Indiana Air National Guard, which has been very supportive of our work on the Refuge and Old Timbers Lodge. In general, our programs have been appreciated and supported by those attending. We have a core membership that is loyal and industrious.

This year also brings an opportunity to formulate our vision for the future: Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge is currently in the process of developing their Comprehensive Conser-

*Continued on pg. 3*

## **Tony Thomson makes a surprise visit to Big Oaks and Old Timbers Lodge**

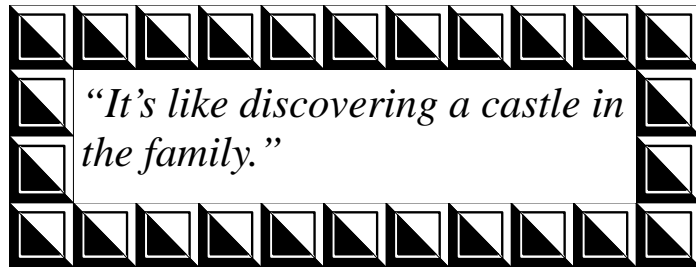
by Beth Black

On occasion a new face walks through the Refuge office's door. Typically, the new face is someone wanting to explore the Refuge. They may be birders interested in expanding their life list, they may be anglers looking for a new spot to try their luck or they often are ancestors of those families whose lives were forever changed by the establishment of Jefferson Proving Ground. And very often, they are people who have either spent time at Old Timbers Lodge or have heard about and would like to see Old Timbers Lodge. This recent surprise visitor stated that he had family connections to Old Timbers Lodge and that he was hoping for nothing more than the opportunity to drive past the Lodge. We often hear from families whose relatives helped build the Lodge, or had some hand in the Lodge's history. Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge had a special visitor on April 25<sup>th</sup>. Little did we know that on that day this enquiry was someone very specific to the history of Old Timbers Lodge.



Photo of Tony and Alyson Thomson courtesy of Tony Thomson

Tony and his wife, Alyson, introduced themselves as we began to make our way up to the Lodge. Tony again mentioned that he was affiliated with the builder of the Lodge and I suggested that there were a lot of folks who helped build the Lodge. He then clarified that he was a grandson of Alexander Thomson. Imagine my surprise! It was none other than Chilton "Tony" Thomson, Jr.. You may recognize the name Chilton Thomson, he was the youngest son of Alexander Thomson, the man who built Old Timbers Lodge. Chilton Thomson, Sr. was the author of the book *Old Timbers*. He wrote the book in 1981 as a remembrance of his days as a young boy at the Lodge.



*"It's like discovering a castle in the family."*

To the best of my knowledge, these are the first Thomson family members to recently set foot at Old Timbers Lodge. Alyson walked around the exterior of the Lodge and took photos, while Tony explored the interior. Tony shared that he had been trying for a couple of hours to get to Old Timbers. They even tried driving across a field trying to get to the road that leads to Old Timbers. After stopping in New Marion in an attempt

to get better directions, they were given some good information about Big Oaks, and that's how they found their way to our office. After visiting Old Timbers, Tony said, "It's like discovering a castle in the family".

We suggested that Tony and Alyson come back and visit us again soon. We told Tony that the Refuge, Big Oaks Conservation Society and JPG Heritage Partnership would love to host a celebration/reunion for them at the Lodge. We think such a gathering would celebrate the legacy of the Thomson family and the hard work of Big Oaks Conservation Society.



# ***Calendar of Events and Information***

*Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge and Big Oaks Conservation Society  
2013 Summer Calendar of Events*

## **June**

8.....**9th Annual Outdoor Women at Big Oaks (OWBO)**

Registration is \$60.00. Youth registration (Ages 12-18 with registered adult) is \$35.00. The fee covers classes, instructional materials, a welcome gift, continental breakfast, lunch, drinks, and other refreshments. New Classes including fly fishing. Volunteers need to be at OTL by 7:45am. Any questions contact Denise Leiske, cell (812) 216-7801.

## **July**

20.....**Take a Kid Fishing Day (TKFD)**

7:00am –4:30pm, Safety Briefing at the Refuge Office. Free lunch and drinks. Prize drawings and programs will be at Old Timbers Lake Dam. No licenses required when accompanying a kid. For any questions call (812) 273-0783.



## **August**

3.....Butterfly Survey

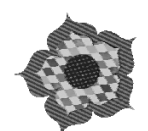
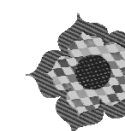
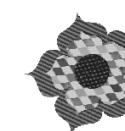
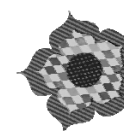
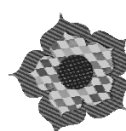
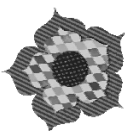
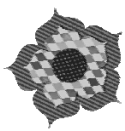
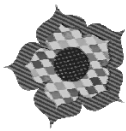
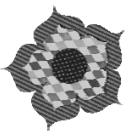
5.....Ice Cream Social, Contact Dave Bear

16.....Squirrel Season Opens at Big Oaks NWR



## **September**

14.....Family Day at Old Timbers Lodge - Tours will be available.



## **A Word From the President**

*Continued from pg. 1*

vation Plan (CCP). This process provides for public comment and input; now is the time for “wish list” items to be proposed. This is our opportunity to advocate for a visitors’ center, improved public access, suggestions for additional or alternative refuge usage or programs, for example.

It is my hope that all BOCS members become more engaged in our friends group and in the efforts to expand our membership, and continue to actively support BONWR. We love our refuge!



## **Dr. Mulford Details a Labor of Love**

*By Jim Jackson*



Photo of Dr. Bob Mulford by BOCS

The March BOCS monthly meeting was held at the Tyson Library in Versailles, IN. The featured speaker was Dr. Bob Mulford, assisted by his wife Ellen. Dr. Mulford detailed the history of his family farm from its acquisition in 1940 and the working of the farm as a traditional agricultural endeavor. Growing up on that farm, Dr. Mulford developed an appreciation of both the grandeur of his natural surroundings as well as the deep, simple, yet profound pleasure that is found in nature. He described his role in the family management of the farm. In the sixties, Dr. Mulford related the delights of sight, sound, and smells of the farm, and the flora and fauna encompassed by it.

Dr. Mulford and Ellen returned to the farm in 1974 and made it their home. He describes in detail the changes in the land brought about by its ever-increasing use for row crop production, relating that as the area of tillage for crops increased, those sights and sounds and the plant and animal species that were the joy of living on the farm were rapidly decreasing, and in some cases, disappearing. This led Bob and Ellen to a decision to preserve the farm for his family, nature and the land.

Dr. Mulford detailed the task of extensive and painstaking restoration of the farmland to its natural state. Every effort was made to restore the plant life and animal habitat, including wetlands. A cadre of conservation and wildlife experts were consulted from various agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, and Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The results of this passionate effort by the Mulfords have been remarkable. They have seen a return of previous species, including 40 new bird species (now totaling about 200 in all), a regrowth of native trees and grasses, and a re-establishment of a natural balance to the land. The joy and pleasure of nature Dr. Bob experienced as a youth and young man had returned.

In his presentation, Dr Mulford clearly demonstrated his passion for this restoration, and for the results. The property has been used for education, nature observation and interpretation, bringing the expertise of Ellen's teaching career into play. His love of and respect for the land is clear in the passion he demonstrates for it. Dr. Mulford closed his presentation with a quote from Aldo Leopold: "What more delightful a vocation than to take a piece of land and by cautious experimentation to prove how it works. What more substantial service to conservation than to practice it on one's own land."

**BOCS** would like to thank the Jefferson County Public Library for allowing the group to conduct meetings and presentations at their facility throughout the year.

## **Dave Jones Receives The Midwest Region Torch Award**

*By Tina Shaw  
External Affairs*

The Midwest Region Torch Award has been passed on to another well-respected individual in the wildland fire profession. Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge Range Technician David Jones was recognized as the recipient of this year's Torch Award in mid-February.

With more than eight years of fire experience at Big Oaks, Jones typifies the Midwest Region fire program's steadfast focus on safety and conservation. The Torch Award recognizes staff dedication to the conservation of wildlife habitat utilizing safe hazard fuel and prescribed fire reduction techniques. Jones follows in the footsteps of past honorees: Chris Mursu of Sherburne Refuge, Mike Belsky of Necedah Refuge, Erik Acker of Port Louisa Refuge, Ben Halverson of Leopold WMD and Eric Nelson of Agassiz Refuge.

The Midwest Region fire program is built on the essential tenets of regional cooperation and interagency collaboration in meeting habitat conservation burning goals. Jones continues to meet this mission by mentoring young firefighters in many aspects of the job, sharing his skills in metal fabricating, engine repair, chainsaw operation and heavy equipment use. Bringing a can-do attitude to everything he does, Jones possesses strong chainsaw skills and has shown leadership in training more than 100 sawyers in the past seven years.

"He possesses all the qualities and skills needed to be a firefighter in this new era," explained Midwest Regional Fire Management Coordinator Dan Dearborn. "While he excels in the field, Dave also possesses the technical skills to help the fire crew to get the task done on the ground."

Jones is committed to Big Oaks and the wider U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Fire Management Program. With his leadership and example, the Midwest Region fire program will continue to exceed annual goals and objectives successfully and safely.



Regional Fire Management Coordinator Dan Dearborn, Regional Director Tom Melius, Deputy Regional Director Charlie Wooley and Regional Chief of Refuges Charlie Blair recognize 2012 Torch Award winner Range Technician David Jones. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photo by Garrett Peterson)

## **Refuge Manager's Corner: Comprehensive Conservation Planning Begins**

By Joe Robb

The staff at Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge have begun work on a comprehensive conservation plan, or CCP, for the Refuge. The CCP establishes a management "blueprint" for the next 15 years. Goals, objectives, and strategies developed for the plan will ensure that the Refuge fulfills its establishment purposes and that its management is consistent with the policies and mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This process also ensures that we look at

***The first phase of the planning process includes a public scoping period.***

how we can better meet our visitor's needs and give them the best possible refuge experience.

It typically takes two to three years to complete a CCP. Public participation will be an essential part of this planning process. Refuge and regional office staff have begun gathering information and resources for the planning process. A preliminary, internal meeting was held at Big Oaks NWR to kick off the planning process during the last week of February.

The first phase of the planning process includes a public scoping period. During this period the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service solicits input from partners, stakeholders, and others interested in the Refuge to identify and clarify issues and concerns that can be addressed in the plan. To support communication and increase opportunities for public input, open houses were hosted by the Refuge during this time period in Jennings, Ripley and Jefferson Counties.

Mardean Roach and I attended the open houses to answer questions and discuss the refuge; representatives from Big Oaks Conservation Society (President Jim Jackson, Vice President Fred Swinney, and Board Members Jean Herron, and Dave Bear) also attended the meetings. The open houses were an opportunity for everyone to be

actively involved in the planning process, learn more about the Refuge, and express thoughts and opinions about the management of the Refuge.

The official public scoping period for Big Oaks NWR will run from March 25 through April 26, 2013. By the time this newsletter comes out this period will be over. But we encourage you to still participate by submitting your thoughts and ideas using the [Big Oaks NWR CCP Comment Form](#) (even if it is after the official public scoping period). This form is available online on our website or in the refuge office.

### **Next Steps**

The planning team will continue gathering information and resources over the coming months, and will engage Service partners in a planning workshop this summer. Following the workshop, there will be an internal review of comments received during scoping by upper management in the Service. The planning team will then use all of the input gathered during scoping to develop a range of alternatives for the future management of the refuge.

An environmental assessment will be developed to evaluate how well each alternative addresses management issues, and a preferred alternative

***The planning team will then use all of the input gathered during scoping to develop a range of alternatives for the future management of the refuge.***

will be identified by the Service. The environmental assessment will be accompanied by a draft CCP based on the preferred alternative, and the combined document will be released and distributed for public review and comment. Thereafter, a final CCP will be created, approved, and used to guide the future management of Big Oaks NWR.

*CCP continued on page 7...*



## **John Hunt Morgan Raid Commemorative Tour**

By Ken Knouf

This July represents the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's Raid across southern Indiana and Ohio. To commemorate the Civil War's longest raid, Historic Hoosier Hills Resource Conservation & Development in partnership with Big Oaks Conservation Society and Big Oaks NWR as well as other sponsors will be conducting a one day tour on Saturday, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013. This day is exactly 150 years and one day since Morgan and 2,200 Confederate cavalymen rode across the Refuge on their way east with hopes of eventually re-crossing the Ohio River.

Registrants will meet at 8:00 a.m. at the USDA facility at the corner of St. Rt 256 and Hwy 62 and at 8:30 travel by van convoy to Lexington, IN where Morgan spent a night. From Lexington, the vans will travel north through Blocher, Deputy, Paris, Stream Cliff Farm, before stopping at Vernon to hear about the town's defense as related by the Vernon Greys Reenactment Unit. The tour will then head south down Hwy 7 to Dupont

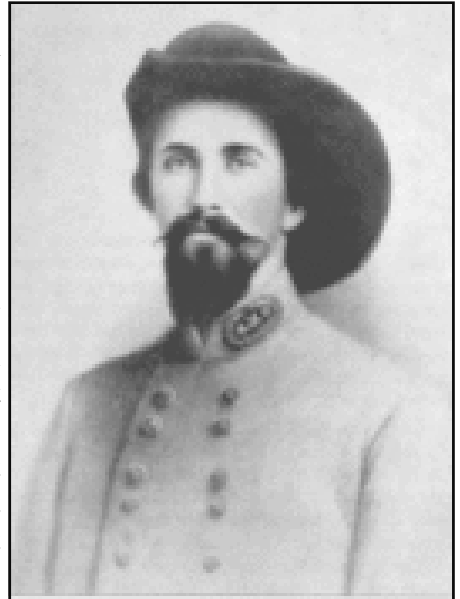


Photo of General John Hunt Morgan  
<http://cncycl.opentopia.com>



Map of Morgan's Raid  
<http://civilwar.connerprairie.org>

and then head east skirting the west perimeter of Big Oaks. Entering the former Jefferson Proving Ground through Gate 18, the tour will then travel up West Perimeter Rd to D Road. The caravan will then travel east on D Rd. following much of the original route followed by Morgan's column. This will be a special feature of the tour since this area is rarely open to the public. Coming out on the east side of the Refuge at D Rd., the tour will head towards the main gate and end up back at the starting point, arriving back at the cars around 4:00 p.m.

The cost of the tour will be \$40 for the first registrant and \$30 for each additional family member or friend. Included will be lunch, interpreters in each van,

handouts, and other items associated with the John Hunt Morgan Heritage Trail. Information is available by calling the HHH office in Versailles at (812) 689-4107.

## **Comprehensive Conservation Planning, cont...**

More Information on the Big Oaks NWR comprehensive conservation planning effort is available by emailing, calling, or writing the Refuge.

Phone: 812-273-0783  
Email: [bigoaks@fws.gov](mailto:bigoaks@fws.gov)

Letters:  
Refuge Manager  
Big Oaks NWR  
Attention: CCP Comment  
1661 West JPG Niblo Road  
Madison, Indiana, 47250



## **The Mudpuppies of Otter Creek**

*By Andrew Hoffman*

On a hot June day, a small group of intrepid amphibian enthusiasts trudged through the cool waters of Otter Creek in search of a very unique amphibian. As I carefully lifted up a large flat rock along the shore, the others positioned themselves further out into the stream with nets at the ready. A dark cloud of mud and silt blossomed out from beneath the rock and out from the muck came our first mudpuppy. Mudpuppies lead reclusive lives under large rocks, within root tangles, and in the deeper holes of rivers and lakes. These large, mottled-brown salamanders may reach a length of around a foot and have bushy red gills which allow them to breathe underwater.



*Andrew Hoffman, 2012*

Mudpuppy Photo by Andrew Hoffman

They require clean, unpolluted waters and are considered a good indicator of water quality. Throughout much of their range, they have disappeared from or become scarce in streams and lakes where they were once common. Mudpuppies were initially found at Big Oaks NWR by researchers using electroshocking equipment to capture fish, but little else was known about their occurrence on the Refuge until recently.

During the summer of 2012, a concentrated effort was made to search for mudpuppies in Otter Creek and Graham Creek. In the heat of what turned out to be a very dry summer, interns and interested volunteers were more than happy to spend a few days wading through the cool stream in search of salamanders. Our small crew overturned more than 1,000 rocks in our search. While only five mudpuppies were found, we were able to find a nesting female and confirm that the population is breeding. Like many other salamanders, female mudpuppies will actually guard their eggs.

As this spring progresses, we may begin surveying for nests again and expand our search into the other



*Andrew Hoffman, 2012*

Mudpuppy Photo by Andrew Hoffman

large refuge streams (such as Graham and Big Creek). These large aquatic salamanders are an important component of our streams and it seems that Otter Creek (and likely others on the refuge) may serve as a stronghold for this sensitive amphibian in the midst of heavily silted and polluted streams elsewhere. There is even a mussel species whose larvae must live within the mudpuppy's gills to reach adulthood. This salamander mussel may serve as a more useful indicator of mudpuppy presence in our searches. Hopefully, as we learn more about this salamander at Big Oaks we may also better understand what it takes to preserve and improve our stream water quality.



## ***Nesting Bald Eagles at Old Timbers Lake***

*By Ben Walker*

A pair of bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) now calls Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) home, taking up residence on Old Timbers Lake. Bald eagles have been seen on Big Oaks NWR for a number of years; however the Refuge has not had a pair nest within Refuge boundaries until now! The nest was first discovered by Refuge employees, Lisa and David Jones, in early January when they witnessed the pair gathering nest material from around the lake. Since then, the pair was first observed incubating their eggs on the 21st of February 2013. Incubation is typically shared by both the male and the female; however the female will spend most of her time on the nest. The incubation period for a bald eagle typically lasts about 35 days, meaning the eggs at Big Oaks NWR hatched during the last few days of March. Two eaglets have been confirmed in the nest and can be regularly seen. Young bald eagles grow very rapidly and will likely take their first flight 10 to 12 weeks after hatching. Although they will be capable of flight at this point, they will still stay close to their parents for another 6 weeks to learn skills, such as hunting. Refuge staff will monitor the eaglets throughout the spring and summer to document their development.



Photo of Bald Eagle's Nest by Ben Walker

Although the adult eagles do not appear to be startled easily, Refuge staff have taken certain precautions to avoid disturbing them. A 350 ft buffer was established around the eagle nest to prevent anyone from straying too close to it. Orange buoys can be seen on the lake, marking the closed area around the eagle nest. Refuge visitors are asked to refrain from entering this closed area so the eagles are able to tend to their young without disturbance. The nest can be seen across from Old Chimney Point with a pair of binoculars or a spotting scope on any public use day. Please come visit us this spring and summer to see the eagles and watch the eaglets grow!

*Bald eagle population numbers have rebounded tremendously since the pesticide DDT was banned and the species was protected under the Endangered Species Act. The bald eagle was removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species on August 9, 2007. Although bald eagles are delisted, they are still protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Lacey Act.*



Bald Eagle, USFWS Photo

# CHANGES AND CHALLENGES: A CAUTIONARY TALE

By Jim Jackson

For BOCS and our refuge, Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge, 2013 is a year of challenge and possibly change. Starting at the top, a new Secretary of the Interior has been appointed by President Obama; as of



April 10, former REI CEO Sally Jewell has succeeded Secretary Ken Salazar. How this change might affect the Wildlife Refuge System, and friends' groups such as ours is an unknown quantity at this time. The federal budget sequester looms heavily over all federal agencies; although its impact on the National Wildlife Refuge System and refuges such as ours is yet to be determined, it is certain that some changes will be forthcoming. These may take the form of staff furloughs; reduction in overall staff; limitations to existing public use; possible consolidation of refuges or staff sharing between refuges. Clearly, this situation does and will present significant challenges to our refuge manager and staff as the scope and nature of these changes becomes known.

There are important challenges awaiting BOCs as well. Our membership has declined significantly over the past three years; and that our current membership is graying is readily apparent. Expanding our membership numbers and diversity is critical to the continued

existence and effectiveness of BOCS. Our primary challenge is to build our membership as aggressively as possible, with the emphasis on younger members, and those who will bring the skills, tech savvy, energy and passion to our Society. The obvious corollary to this is development of a capable, younger, and more diverse Board of Directors. The article on the next page of this newsletter details this challenge more completely.

Although membership and Board development is and must remain our primary and most urgent challenge, ever-present tasks of fund-raising; expansion of programs and activities; marketing our mission and our refuge to the community, website development, preservation of the heritage of our Refuge, and continued stewardship of Old Timbers Lodge, all are becoming increasingly daunting. All of these issues must be appropriately addressed if we are to fulfill our primary mission, which is to support Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge. While seemingly overwhelming, these challenges can be overcome; the key to success is aggressive membership development, and continuation of the hard work and passion BOCS has exhibited throughout its existence.

**All of these issues must be appropriately addressed if we are to fulfill our primary mission, which is to support Big Oaks Na-**



**Mission Statement:** *To support the goals of wildlife conservation and habitat restoration at Big Oaks NWR; develop environmental education programs; enhance public awareness; encourage use and appreciation for the natural and cultural assets unique to Big Oaks.*

## BOCS SEEKS CANDIDATES FOR BOARD



This fall, the terms of Jean Herron, Ed Schaefer, and Bob Hudson will expire on the board of directors. At the annual meeting new directors will be elected from the membership. Immediately after the election, the newly elected board will join the returning directors, Jim Jackson, Fred Swinney, Bill Hughes and Dave Bear to elect the officers for the upcoming term.

BOCS is seeking interested candidates who are committed to BOCS for the board positions. A candidate for this office should be computer literate, as much of board communication and some of the business is conducted via email. In addition, skills in the fields of information technology, marketing, bookkeeping, business and communication are needed, as the incoming board will be addressing the vacant positions of treasurer and secretary. Concurrence with the mission of BOCS and desire to support Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge are also essential pre-requisites.

Current BOCS members are urged to contact any member of the current Board of Directors or senior BONWR staff with the name of anyone who might be an effective candidate for the Board. The current Board will make contact with that person to determine their level of interest, and to inform him or her of the duties and responsibilities of a director.

### **Big Oaks Conservation Society Membership Benefits**



10% discount on merchandise



Opportunities to participate in special refuge events



Contribute to the improvement of the refuge for all visitors



Big Oaks Newsletter

### Yearly BOCS Membership (Oct. 1, 2011 to Sept. 30, 2012)

Please select a category:

\_\_\_ Youth \$5

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Individual \$15

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Family \$25

City \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Supporting \$25

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Lifetime (per Individual) \$150

Phone (       ) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Corporate \$500

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like to join or rejoin the Big Oaks Conservation Society to support the refuge, please fill out this membership form and send it along with your check to: Big Oaks Conservation Society, P.O. Box 935, Madison, IN 47250





Big Oaks Conservation Society

P.O. Box 935

Madison, IN 47250



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**Fred Swinney** - Vice President  
**Dave Bear** - Secretary &  
Business Manager  
**Jean Herron** - Treasurer  
**Bill Hughes** - Board Member  
**Bob Hudson** - Board Member  
**Ed Schaefer** - Board Member  
**Dr. Joe Robb** - Executive Secretary

**[www.bigoaks.org](http://www.bigoaks.org)**

**Refuge Staff**

**Dr. Joe Robb** - Refuge Manager  
**Mardean Roach** - Admin. Support Asst.  
**Brian Winters** - Fire Management Officer  
**Ben Walker** - Wildlife Biologist  
**David Jones** - Lead Range Technician  
**Casey Mefford** - Range Technician  
**Kerry Brinson** - Maintenance  
**Beth Black** - Park Ranger  
**Lisa Jones** - Park Ranger  
**Laura Lake** - Park Ranger  
**Andrew Hoffman** - Intern  
**Kelsey Flowers** - Intern

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